

The *Vita Alcuini*, Asser and Scholarly Service at the Court of Alfred the Great*

The pursuit of learning at the court of King Alfred the Great (r. 871–899) has long been a subject of scholarly debate and public fascination. The volume of material that survives from Alfred's reign and the unique form that it takes have contributed to an image of a king who was passionately committed to improving the standard of learning in his kingdom. Nowhere is this illustrated more clearly than in the translations of various Latin texts into Old English surviving from Alfred's reign. In the preface to the Old English translation of Gregory the Great's *Regula pastoralis*, Alfred (or someone speaking in his voice) laments the decline in learning in England and suggests as an antidote the translation into Old English of the key texts which 'are the most necessary for all men to know'.¹ The preface also states that a copy of the translation will be sent to each bishopric, along with an *æstel* worth fifty mancuses.² Taken together, this material offers a key insight into Alfred's kingship, allowing us to get closer to this Anglo-Saxon king than any king preceding him.

It is in this context that we must view the summoning of scholars to Alfred's court. Bemoaning the standard of learning in Wessex, Alfred looked further afield for instructors. Among the scholars summoned was Asser, a monk from St David's in south Wales, whose *Life of King Alfred*, composed in 893, has proved an invaluable window onto the life, court and politics of its subject, as well as ninth-century Britain more generally. The biography provides us with details that would otherwise be unknown, including an overview of Alfred's

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¹ *Regula pastoralis*, ed. Henry Sweet, *King Alfred's West Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care* (2 vols., Oxford, 1871), i. 2–9 (tr. S. Keynes and M. Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources* [London, 1983], pp. 123–4).

² This *æstel* is generally believed to be a pointer of sorts, to aid with reading, and has been connected to the Alfred Jewel, found in Somerset. For further discussion, see Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 203–6; D. Pratt, *The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 189–92.

relations with Wales and the Welsh. In a period for which the Welsh annals are frustratingly sparse, and the Welsh rarely feature in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Asser's *Life* is a crucial source. Moreover, the biography offers a key insight into the workings of the Alfredian court; in particular, Asser's discussion of his own experience as a scholar and courtier illuminates the scholarly community surrounding the king.

There has been much debate over the purpose of the work and the audience it was intended to reach. This issue is made more difficult by there having been only one known medieval manuscript of the *Life* (Cotton Otho A.xii), copied in England around the year 1000, which was destroyed by fire in 1731.³ Thus, we are forced to rely upon the evidence of later writers who used Asser's work to assess its circulation. Of these later writers, most appear to have drawn on a version akin to that originally in the Cotton manuscript, with only the so-called *Annals of St Neots* of the twelfth century providing sufficient evidence to suggest that a different version also circulated.⁴

The case has been made that Asser was writing for a Welsh audience of some sort.⁵ He frequently provides Welsh place-names, and often digresses to explain the location of certain places outside Wales. He writes, for example, that Surrey is 'a district situated on the southern bank of the river Thames, to the west of Kent'.⁶ Moreover, as well as paying close

³ H. Gneuss and M. Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: A Bibliographical Handlist of Manuscripts Written or Owned in England up to 1100* (Toronto, ON, 2014), p. 276.

⁴ Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 56–7; *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*, XVII: *The Annals of St Neots with Vita Prima Sancti Neoti*, ed. D. Dumville and M. Lapidge (Cambridge, 1985), p. xlii.

⁵ As suggested initially by M. Schutt, 'The Literary Form of Asser's "Vita Alfredi"', *English Historical Review*, lxxii (1957), pp. 209–20, at 189 and 204. For a full discussion of the case for a Welsh readership, see Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 56. See also S. Keynes, 'Review Article: On the Authenticity of Asser's *Life of King Alfred*', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, xlvii (1996), pp. 529–51, at 540; Pratt, *Political Thought of King Alfred the Great*, p. 109; D.P. Kirby, 'Asser and his *Life of King Alfred*', *Studia Celtica*, vi (1971), pp. 12–35, at 17; S. Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', in M.A.S. Blackburn and D.N. Dumville, eds., *Kings, Currency and Alliances: History and Coinage of Southern England in the Ninth Century* (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 1–45, at 42–3.

⁶ 'quae paga sita est in meridiana Tamesis fluminis ripa ab occidentali parte Cantiae': Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 5, ed. W.H. Stevenson, *Asser's Life of King Alfred, together with the Annals of Saint Neots Erroneously Ascribed to Asser* (Oxford, 1959), pp. 5–6 (tr. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 68).

attention to Welsh politics, Asser discusses his own background at St David's. Some centuries later, Gerald of Wales cited the text in his *Life of St Æthelberht*, written in the 1190s, and consequently it is possible (although not certain) that the *Life* was known in Wales in the twelfth century.⁷ However, even if we were to accept that Asser intended his work to reach Wales, this would raise further questions. Wales did not exist as a single political or territorial unit in this period; indeed, the *Life of King Alfred* itself provides excellent evidence of the divisions of the ninth century. Thus, whether Asser was writing for the benefit of Anarawd of Gwynedd, Hyfaidd of Dyfed or the community at St David's would have very different implications for how we understand his work.⁸

The view that Asser was writing for a Welsh audience has not gone uncontested. James Campbell proposed that the work was intended to be read in Wessex. Dismissing the provision of Welsh place-names as simply a product of Asser's interest in etymology, he pointed to certain chapters that would be difficult to explain unless Asser had a West Saxon audience in mind—for example, the concern with the construction of fortifications in Alfred's kingdom. The primary intended reader, in his view, would have been the king himself, to whom the work was dedicated.⁹ Moving away from Alfred, but staying at the West Saxon court, Anton Scharer has argued that the work was composed as a tool for the education of princes or royal priests.¹⁰ Alban Gautier has also raised the possibility of a court

⁷ See S. Keynes, 'The Power of the Written Word: Alfredian England, 871–899', in T. Reuter, ed., *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Centenary Conference* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 175–97, at 181–2 n. 31; C. Brett, 'John Leland, Wales, and Early British History', *Welsh History Review*, xv (1990–91), pp. 169–82, at 174–5. For further discussion of the *Life of St Æthelberht*, see R. Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales, 1146–1223* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 118 n. 58 and 145. There is a possibility that the tenth-century poet of *Armes Prydein Vawr* ('The Great Prophecy of Britain') was familiar with Asser's *Life*; see R. Thomas and D. Callander, 'Reading Asser in Early Medieval Wales: The Evidence of *Armes Prydein Vawr*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, xlv (2018), pp. 115–45.

⁸ For further discussion of the divisions in ninth-century Wales, see T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons, 350–1064* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 479–96.

⁹ J. Campbell, 'Asser's *Life of King Alfred*', in C. Holdsworth and T.P. Wiseman, eds., *The Inheritance of Historiography, 350–900* (Exeter, 1986), pp. 115–35, at 123.

¹⁰ A. Scharer, 'The Writing of History at King Alfred's Court', *Early Medieval Europe*, v (1996), pp. 177–206, at 186 and 204–5. Cf. Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', pp. 42–3.

audience, highlighting a preoccupation with concerns which would make the most sense in this context—for example, the status of the queen, and Æthelwulf’s will. He suggests that the work may even have been composed in an attempt to secure the succession for Alfred’s sons (rather than his nephews): Alfred’s nephews are not mentioned in the text, and his brothers are depicted as inferior rulers.¹¹

Yet it is not necessary to move the Welsh out of the frame in order to place king and court at the centre. It is possible that Asser envisaged an audience consisting of several layers. In view of Asser’s own position at the West Saxon court, it is unlikely that Alfred would have been unfamiliar with the work and that it was unread by other courtiers.¹² On the other hand, the Welsh material is too substantial to ignore. That Asser had both audiences in mind is certainly a plausible hypothesis.¹³

The *Life of King Alfred*’s status as the earliest extant royal biography from Britain means that many of the text’s other characteristics have attracted close scholarly scrutiny, including its structure, its sources, and possible external influences. Connections with the continent have been central to such investigations. The scholarly community at Alfred’s court boasted a significant international dimension: as well as bishops and priests from Mercia, Alfred enlisted the services of Grimbald of St Bertin and John the Old Saxon. This international dimension is also reflected in Asser’s work. The influence of Einhard’s *Vita Karoli* is evident, with Asser quoting directly from the Carolingian biography on several occasions.¹⁴

¹¹ Asser, *Histoire du roi Alfred*, tr. A. Gautier (Paris, 2013), pp. liii–liv.

¹² Scharer, ‘Writing of History’, p. 186.

¹³ David Kirby has suggested that the *Life* may have had multiple audiences. However, his division of the composition of the *Life* into distinct sections, intended for different audiences, is unconvincing; see ‘Asser and his Life of King Alfred’, pp. 20–35. Cf. Campbell, ‘Asser’s Life of Alfred’, pp. 133–5.

¹⁴ For further discussion, see Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 54–5 and 254 n. 139. For Asser’s use of Einhard’s *Vita Karoli*, see Schutt, ‘Literary Form of Asser’s “Vita Alfredi”’; T.M. Kalmar, ‘Asser’s *Imitatio* of

Attention has also been drawn to the similarities between Asser's *Life* and the biographies of Louis the Pious by Thegan and the Astronomer. Donald Bullough argued that in many respects Asser's work resembles Thegan's *Gesta Hludowici imperatoris* more closely than Einhard's *Vita Karoli*, pointing to the annalistic structure of the two texts and certain similarities in content, such as their stress on the superiority of the younger son.¹⁵ James Campbell developed this further, comparing Asser's work with Thegan and also with the Astronomer's *Vita Hludowici imperatoris*, focusing in particular on the annalistic element to the structure of all three biographies. Campbell noted, however, that Asser's familiarity with these texts cannot be proven.¹⁶ Other scholars have broadened the search to identify sources beyond royal biography that may have influenced Asser: Matthew Kempshall has focused on Gregory the Great's *Regula pastoralis*, and Michael Lapidge has produced a survey of sources from which verbal borrowings can be detected.¹⁷

In the notes that accompany their translation of Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, Keynes and Lapidge (acknowledging a debt to Pierre Chaplais) note a parallel between the biography of King Alfred and another continental text, the anonymous early ninth-century *Vita Alcuini*. They suggest that the section of Asser's *Life* relating his own journey from St David's to Alfred's court (chs. 79 and 81) bears striking similarities to a section of the *Vita Alcuini* (ch. 9) that describes how Alcuin was hired by Charlemagne. As they state:

The similarities include the presentation of the discussion between king and scholar, the scholar's declaration of his need to get permission from his own people to leave

Einhard: Clichés, Echoes, and Allusions', *EOLAS: the Journal of the American Society of Irish Medieval Studies*, vii (2014), pp. 65–91.

¹⁵ D.A. Bullough, 'The Educational Tradition in England from Alfred to Ælfric: Teaching *utriusque linguae*', in his *Carolingian Renewal: Sources and Heritage* (Manchester, 1991), pp. 297–334, at 317–18 n. 3.

¹⁶ Campbell, 'Asser's Life of Alfred', pp. 118–19. See also Kirby, 'Asser and his Life of King Alfred', p. 13.

¹⁷ M. Kempshall, 'No Bishop, No King: The Ministerial Ideology of Kingship and Asser's *Res Gestae Aelfredi*', in R. Gameson and H. Leyser, eds., *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages: Studies Presented to Henry Mayr-Harting* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 106–27; M. Lapidge, 'Asser's Reading', in T. Reuter, ed., *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Centenary Conferences* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 27–43.

them, and the king's grant of two monasteries to the scholar to strengthen his resolve to stay. If all this is anything more than an interesting coincidence, it may be that Asser saw his position at Alfred's court as analogous to that of Alcuin at Charlemagne's (and perhaps Alfred felt the same way); the analogy would have been flattering to them both. Acquaintance on Asser's part with the *Vita Alcuini* would add further to the already extensive evidence for his knowledge of Frankish history and literature.¹⁸

Simon Keynes has more recently drawn further attention to this possible connection between the *Life of King Alfred* and the *Vita Alcuini*, and the similarities have also been recognised by other scholars.¹⁹ Christiane Veyrard-Cosme summarised the parallels in her recent edition of the *Vita Alcuini*, and, moving beyond the anonymous biography itself, Malcolm Godden has suggested similarities between Asser's *Life* and Alcuin's letters.²⁰ In this scholarly context, a close study of this possible connection is desirable. Unlike many of the texts with which it has been argued that Asser was familiar, there are no direct verbal correspondences between Asser's biography and the *Vita Alcuini*, and so, as Keynes and Lapidge note, the similarities may simply be an 'interesting coincidence', not necessarily pointing to acquaintance with the *Vita Alcuini* on Asser's part.²¹ There is no manuscript evidence that the *Vita Alcuini* was ever known in Britain, and no other quotations or library catalogue references have been uncovered.²² Thus the burden of proof for a connection between the two texts lies wholly on

¹⁸ Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 265 n. 195. See also P. Wormald, 'Alfred (848/9–899)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

¹⁹ S. Keynes, 'Alfred the Great and the Kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons', in N.G. Discenza and P.E. Szarmach, eds., *A Companion to Alfred the Great* (Leiden, 2014), pp. 13–46, at 35–6.

²⁰ C. Veyrard-Cosme, *La Vita beati Alcuini (IX^e s.): Les Inflexions d'un discours de sainteté. Introduction, édition et traduction annotée du texte d'après Reims, BM 1395 (K 784)* (Collection des Études Augustiniennes: Série Moyen Âge et Temps modernes, 54; Paris, 2017), pp. 179–80; M. Godden, 'Stories from the Court of King Alfred', in S. McWilliams, ed., *Saints and Scholars: New Perspectives on Anglo-Saxon Literature and Culture in Honour of Hugh Magennis* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 123–40, at 137–8.

²¹ For a detailed examination of the verbal parallels between Asser's *Life of King Alfred* and other works, see Lapidge, 'Asser's Reading'.

²² See M. Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 381–2.

Asser's work. Consequently, in order to establish whether the parallels that have been observed are simply coincidence, or instead evidence of familiarity and influence, a comprehensive study of the relationship between the *Vita Alcuini* and Asser's *Life of King Alfred* is required. This article provides such an enquiry. I consider each parallel in turn to probe the nature and extent of Asser's familiarity with the *Vita Alcuini*. I subsequently investigate the implications of a relationship between the two texts for our understanding of Asser's own agenda, and especially his relationship with Wales and St David's; for the transmission history of the *Vita Alcuini*; and for connections between Britain and the continent in the ninth century more generally.

I

Fundamental to understanding the parallels between the *Life of King Alfred* and the *Vita Alcuini* is the unusual nature of Asser's work: despite being a biography of King Alfred, it features the author himself as a prominent character. There are two main ways in which Asser appears in his *Life*. First, he refers to himself casually as a witness to several stories he relates. He claims, for example, to have seen letters and gifts sent to Alfred by the patriarch Elias from Jerusalem (ch. 91), and to have visited the battlefield at Ashdown, stating that his depiction of the battle derives from eyewitness accounts (chs. 37–9). Such references add an air of authenticity to his account, a concern which is not unusual in historiography of this period: while the Carolingian biographers tend not to integrate such comments directly into their works, they too attempt to convince their audience of the truthfulness of their accounts, and occasionally cite their sources, usually through the medium of the preface. The Astronomer, for example, notes that the first half of his biography of Louis the Pious relies upon the account of a monk called Adhemar, who was the emperor's contemporary and was

raised with him, whilst he is able to draw upon his own experiences at court for the second half.²³ Einhard similarly states in his preface that nobody could write a more truthful account of Charlemagne than him because of his proximity to the emperor.²⁴

In striking contrast, Asser does not provide a lengthy preface. He opens his text simply with a dedication, identifying himself as ‘Asser, omnium servorum Dei ultimus’ (‘Asser, lowest of all the servants of God’) and dedicating the work ‘Domino meo venerabili piisimoque omnium Brittanniae insulae Christianorum rectori, Ælfred, Anglorum Saxonum regi’ (‘to my esteemed and most holy Lord, Alfred, ruler of all the Christians of Britain, King of the Angles and Saxons’).²⁵ Rather than using a preface to convey the reliability of his account, Asser integrates himself into his work as an eyewitness. In this regard a closer parallel can be drawn with hagiographical texts, which often reference their sources in the main body of the work, as well as in the preface. Both Adomnán, in his *Vita Columbae*, and Bede, in his *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, for example, frequently draw attention to their sources of information, stressing either their proximity to the event described or their reliability.²⁶ Very rarely, however, are the authors themselves eyewitnesses. This does happen occasionally, but more often than not, the reliability of the account is derived from the author speaking to an eyewitness.²⁷ In contrast, Asser seldom refers to another witness; he mostly records what he claims to have seen or heard himself and thus places himself at the centre of the action.

²³ Astronomer, *Vita Hludowici imperatoris*, preface, ed. E. Tremp, *Thegan. die Taten Kaiser Ludwigs; Astronomus. Das Leben Kaiser Ludwigs*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica [hereafter MGH], Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi [hereafter SS rer. Germ.], LXIV (Hannover, 1995), p. 284 (tr. T.F.X. Noble, *Charlemagne and Louis the Pious: The Lives by Einhard, Notker, Ermoldus, Thegan, and the Astronomer* [University Park, PA, 2009], p. 228).

²⁴ Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni*, preface, ed. O. Holder-Egger, *Einhardi, Vita Karoli Magni*, MGH, SS rer. Germ., XXV (Hannover, 1911), pp. 1–2 (tr. Noble, *Charlemagne and Louis the Pious*, p. 22).

²⁵ Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, preface, ed. Stevenson, p. 1 (tr. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 67).

²⁶ See, for example, Adomnán, *Vita Columbae*, i. 1, i. 2, i. 3, i. 20, ii. 4, ii. 9, ii. 40, ii. 45, iii. 19, ed. and tr. A.O. Anderson and M. Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 16–17, 22–3, 26–7, 46–7. 100–101, 106–7, 162–3, 174–9 and 210–11; Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, cc. 3, 8, 10 and 36, ed. and tr. B. Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 164–5, 180–81, 190–91 and 270–71.

²⁷ See, for example, Adomnán, *Vita Columbae*, ii. 45, ed. and tr. Anderson and Anderson, pp. 174–9.

Of particular interest, however, is the second way in which Asser inserts himself into the narrative: by relating his own story. Asser tells us how he was sought out by Alfred and brought to his court from St David's, and of his closeness to the king thereafter. It is far more difficult to find a parallel for this sort of authorial insertion. Our knowledge of the Carolingian biographers normally derives from the preface, and, while hagiographers frequently explain how they came by certain information, they very rarely include their own experiences. A notable exception is the Astronomer's account of his own interaction with Louis when he was interrogated on the appearance of a comet as the expert on such matters.²⁸ However, this is a short passage, describing a very specific situation, and this is the only example where the Astronomer features in the biography. Asser's lengthy passage on his own background is thus a striking contrast, and as much as the *Life* is a biography of Alfred it is also, to no small extent, an autobiography of Asser himself.

It is this autobiographical section of Asser's *Life* which has been compared to the *Vita Alcuini*. Asser dedicates three chapters (chs. 77–9) to Alfred's search for scholars, starting with the arrival of those from Mercia: Werferth, bishop of Worcester (d. 907 x 15), Plegmund, archbishop of Canterbury (d. 914), and the chaplains, Æthelstan and Werwulf.²⁹ When exactly this occurred is unclear, but from Asser's internal chronology, the early 880s is a strong possibility.³⁰ However, Alfred, still unsatisfied, turned to Gaul for more recruits, summoning Grimbold and John the Old Saxon *circa* 885–6.³¹ The chapter on Asser's own summoning is the final episode in this account (ch. 79). Asser thus not only presents himself

²⁸ Astronomer, *Vita Hludowici imperatoris*, ch. 58, ed. Tremp, pp. 518–24 (tr. Noble, *Charlemagne and Louis the Pious*, pp. 292–3). It is on this basis that the author is referred to as the 'Astronomer'. Another example can be found in the *Vita Martini*, where Sulpicius Severus relates how he travelled to meet Martin; see *Vita Martini*, xxv. 1, ed. J. Fontaine, *Sulpice Sévère, Vie de Saint Martin* (3 vols., Paris, 1967), i. 308–11 (tr. C. White, *Early Christian Lives* [London, 1998], p. 157).

²⁹ For further discussion of these individuals, see Keynes, 'Alfred the Great and the Kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons', pp. 28–30.

³⁰ For further discussion of the dating, see Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 26–7 and 213–14 n. 24. Cf. Kirby, 'Asser and his Life of King Alfred', pp. 17–18.

³¹ Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 26–7.

as part of this wider, international community of scholars, but also as the culmination of Alfred's search for expertise—the final addition to a distinguished group.

This episode merits closer examination, as it is central to assessing Asser's familiarity with the *Vita Alcuini*.³² Asser explains how he was summoned from *Britannia* (Wales) and met with Alfred at the royal estate of Dean (in Sussex), where the king requested that Asser commit himself to his service and become a member of his household.³³ Yet this episode does not develop into a straightforward agreement. Asser notes that he must first discuss the matter with his own people (*meorum*, 'my own'), and promises to return with an answer in six months' time.³⁴ However, disaster strikes in the form of illness, and Asser is delayed at the monastery of Caerwent for twelve months.³⁵ Finally he returns to the king, having obtained the agreement of his people, on condition that he is able to spend six months with Alfred and six months back at St David's. Interestingly, this division of time echoes Asser's account of the administration of Alfred's court (ch. 100), whereby the thegns spent a month at court followed by two months away.³⁶ This is not the end of the matter, however. Asser digresses from this topic to discuss briefly the submission of the Welsh kings to Alfred (ch. 80), but then returns to his own experiences (ch. 81). He explains how he repeatedly sought permission from Alfred to return to St David's (he had spent eight months with the king rather than the agreed-upon six), and that Alfred subsequently gifted two monasteries to him,

³² Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 79, ed. Stevenson, pp. 63–6 (tr. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 93–6).

³³ While Asser consistently uses *Britannia* to refer to Wales, context allows us to be certain that this is a reference to an area largely corresponding to modern Wales. He states, for example, that Offa constructed a dyke between Mercia and *Britannia* (ch. 14). Thus, while Wales and Welsh are anachronistic terms, they are worth using as translations of Asser's terminology as he does distinguish between the Britons of Wales and Britons from other regions, such as Cornwall, which he refers to as *Cornubia*, and Brittany, which he describes as *Armorica* (ch. 102).

³⁴ Asser's treatment of his people at St David's is discussed in further detail below.

³⁵ The text reads 'Wintonia civitate', which would conventionally be rendered as 'Winchester'. However, Keynes and Lapidge find this difficult to reconcile with Alfred's apparent ignorance of Asser's illness, and suggest that it may be a spelling of *Guentonia* (Latin for Caerwent) by an English scribe; see *Alfred the Great*, p. 261 n. 175.

³⁶ Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 100, ed. Stevenson, pp. 86–7 (tr. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 106). For further discussion of this arrangement, see Pratt, *Political Thought of King Alfred the Great*, pp. 34–6.

before granting him permission to return to St David's. This detailed account of Asser's own journey from St David's to Wessex can usefully be compared to what the *Vita Alcuini* tells us about Alcuin's journey from Northumbria to Francia to serve Charlemagne.

II

The *Vita Alcuini* is a little-known work. It survives in only two medieval manuscripts, and until recently had received very little attention from scholars (perhaps unsurprisingly, considering the wealth of other source material relating to Alcuin). The older of these two manuscripts (Rheims, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 1395) dates from the ninth century, and has been associated with Archbishop Hincmar, who had moved to Rheims in 845.³⁷ The second manuscript (Troyes, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 1712) dates from the twelfth/thirteenth centuries, with the section containing the *Vita Alcuini* attributed to the thirteenth century, although the text of the *Vita* contained in this manuscript is incomplete.³⁸ The Rheims manuscript was not available to William Arndt, and thus he used later transcriptions and the Troyes manuscript for his edition of the *Vita Alcuini*.³⁹ However, the new edition of the *Vita Alcuini*, recently published by Christiane Veyrard-Cosme, is based on the Rheims manuscript, and it is this edition which is followed here.⁴⁰ Composed in the 820s, the *Vita* is by an anonymous author, who claims to base their narrative on evidence provided by Sigwulf, Alcuin's most faithful disciple. Having followed Alcuin to the continent from

³⁷ Rheims, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 1395, fos. 89–113v. For a detailed discussion of this manuscript, see Veyrard-Cosme, *La Vita Beati Alcuini*, pp. 18–39. For the association with Hincmar, see D.A. Bullough, *Alcuin: Achievement and Reputation. Being Part of the Ford Lectures Delivered in Oxford in Hilary Term 1980* (Leiden, 2004), pp. 21–2; Veyrard-Cosme, *La Vita Beati Alcuini*, pp. 36–9.

³⁸ Troyes, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 1712, fos. 126–177v. For a detailed discussion of this manuscript, see Veyrard-Cosme, *La Vita Beati Alcuini*, pp. 39–49.

³⁹ *Vita Alcuini*, ed. William Arndt, MGH, Scriptores, XV, 1 (Hannover, 1887), pp. 182–97. See also Bullough, *Alcuin*, pp. 21–2, esp. n. 47, and 120–21; Veyrard-Cosme, *La Vita Beati Alcuini*, pp. 18–19.

⁴⁰ Veyrard-Cosme, *La Vita Beati Alcuini*, pp. 194–317.

York, Sigwulf became abbot of Ferrières in 804, and thus it has usually been assumed that the *Vita* was composed at that monastery.⁴¹ However, Veyrard-Cosme has raised the possibility that Sigwulf also succeeded Alcuin as abbot of St Martin's at Tours and suggests that the *Vita* was composed there instead.⁴²

As Alcuin himself leaves us no detailed record of how he entered Charlemagne's service, the *Vita Alcuini* is our only source for this stage in his career, and it is this material (ch. 9) which has been compared with Asser's *Life*.⁴³ The anonymous author explains how Alcuin was sent by Archbishop Eanbald to obtain the pallium from Rome, and how he came to meet Charlemagne at Parma on his way back to Britain. The *Vita* claims that Charlemagne was already familiar with Alcuin and was determined to acquire his services as a scholar, asking him to return to Francia after completing his task. Having obtained permission from York, Alcuin returned to Charlemagne and spent some time with the emperor, introducing him to the liberal arts. Charlemagne granted him two monasteries and asked that he stay with him for a longer period of time, promising a reward of immeasurable riches. Alcuin, however, argued that he could not serve Charlemagne without once again seeking permission from his king and bishop, and urged Charlemagne to help him obtain this concession. Alcuin departed to Britain, obtained the necessary permission, and was able to return to Charlemagne, to the satisfaction of both. The episode ends here and the anonymous author moves on to discuss the Council of Aachen in 799 (ch. 10), at which Alcuin debated questions of doctrine with the heretic Felix of Urgell.

There has been some debate over the chronology of some of the events in this account. A diploma locating Charlemagne at Parma on 15 March 781 provides a possible

⁴¹ Bullough, *Alcuin*, pp. 21–8.

⁴² Veyrard-Cosme, *La Vita Beati Alcuini*, pp. 53–70.

⁴³ *Vita Alcuini*, ch. 9, ed. Veyrard-Cosme, *La Vita Beati Alcuini*, pp. 260–63; Bullough, *Alcuin*, p. 332.

chronological context for the initial meeting with Alcuin that the *Vita* describes.⁴⁴ Moreover, the logical inference from the *Vita*'s account is that Alcuin returned to Francia immediately after seeing the pallium safely back to York. Thus, Alcuin's career on the continent has traditionally been seen as starting at roughly this point in the early 780s.⁴⁵ However, Donald Bullough challenged this interpretation, noting that the evidence for the chronology of Alcuin's journey to and from Rome is inconclusive. Furthermore, Bullough argued that there is no persuasive case that Alcuin departed for Francia immediately after his return to York, suggesting that the evidence instead points to his continued presence in Britain until the visit of the papal legates in 786.⁴⁶ And what of the *Vita*'s claim that Alcuin returned to Francia *secundo* ('a second time'), after returning to his *patria* to request permission to stay on a more permanent basis?⁴⁷ Working from the assumption that Alcuin had settled with Charlemagne from *circa* 786, and this request occurred 'tempore uero aliquanto cum eo peracto' ('after [Alcuin] had passed a certain amount of time with him [Charlemagne]'), it is possible that this reference in the *Vita* corresponds to Alcuin's return to Northumbria in 790, an episode for which his letters provide supporting evidence.⁴⁸ Alcuin's second return to Francia is conventionally dated to 793.⁴⁹ Thus we have a rough indication of how the *Vita*'s account compares with our more general knowledge of Alcuin's life and movements, although these dates remain provisional and ought to be treated with appropriate caution. But

⁴⁴ Bullough, *Alcuin*, p. 332. For the charter, see *Die Urkunden der Karolinger*, I: *Urkunden Pippins, Karlmanns und Karl der Großen*, ed. E. Mühlbacher, MGH, *Diplomata karolinorum*, I (Hannover, 1906), no. 132, pp. 182–3.

⁴⁵ See, for example, E.S. Duckett, *Alcuin, Friend of Charlemagne: His World and his Work* (New York, 1951), pp. 33–6.

⁴⁶ Bullough, *Alcuin*, pp. 336–46.

⁴⁷ *Vita Alcuini*, ch. 9, ed. Veyrard-Cosme, *La Vita Beati Alcuini*, p. 262.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 260. Arndt seems to be of this view, as he dates Alcuin's departure to 790 in the margin of his edition: *Vita Alcuini*, p. 190. Bullough also seemed to be working from this assumption; see Bullough, *Alcuin*, p. 337 n. 18. For Bullough's discussion of Alcuin's return to Northumbria, see *ibid.*, pp. 395–400.

⁴⁹ Based on his absence from England during the Viking attack on Lindisfarne in June 793. For further discussion see Bullough, *Alcuin*, pp. 410–18. Bullough argues that Alcuin had rejoined Charlemagne's court by the beginning of 794, based on the lack of letters written to the Frankish court in late 793/early 794; see *ibid.*, p. 420 n. 278.

assuming that this chronological framework is correct, this short section of the *Vita* on Alcuin's interaction with Charlemagne covers events from 781 to 793, with the next chapter jumping forward to the events of 799 in its discussion of the Council of Aachen.

While this episode in the *Vita Alcuini* is much shorter than the corresponding autobiographical passage in Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, some parallels in content are immediately striking: the hesitancy with which the two scholars commit themselves to their respective kings; the desire to seek external validation before coming to a decision; the gift of two monasteries. However, in order to establish whether Asser was indeed familiar with the *Vita Alcuini*, a closer analysis of the correspondences between the two texts is required. It is impractical to go through each text sentence by sentence since the two narratives do not always follow the same structure: similar episodes can occur in different places, a problem exacerbated by the significant difference in length between the two accounts. While both authors, for example, relate the negotiations between their respective patrons and scholars that ultimately led to a formal agreement, these discussions are located at different points in the narrative. Asser reaches an agreement with Alfred to spend six months at his court and six months at St David's after a lengthy negotiation with the king at his royal estate in Dean and a consultation with his people at St David's. All this occurs at the beginning of the narrative, when Asser and Alfred meet for the first time, and before Asser has spent any time at the king's court. In contrast, Alcuin's recruitment by Charlemagne is somewhat more piecemeal: he first obtains permission to spend some time with Charlemagne after their meeting at Parma, with an agreement for him to stay longer only reached at a later date. Given these differences, we need to proceed carefully. In the next section I examine Asser's text in detail, drawing out each parallel with the *Vita Alcuini*, and noting where in the text of the *Vita Alcuini* this parallel appears. I also note, where relevant, significant differences between the

texts, arguing that in many cases distinctions are best explained by the rather different objectives that each author had in writing.

III

We start with a significant difference. Asser simply notes that he was summoned by Alfred from Wales and travelled to Sussex accompanied by English guides.⁵⁰ We are not told how Alfred came to hear of Asser. In contrast, in the *Vita Alcuini* we are informed that Charlemagne met Alcuin at Parma with some prior knowledge—‘nouerat enim eum quia olim a magistro suo ad ipsum directus fuerat’ (‘for he had become acquainted with him, because once he had been directed to him by his teacher’) —although we are not given any further details of this previous encounter.⁵¹ In the preceding chapter (ch. 8) of the *Vita*, Ælberht (Eanbald’s predecessor as archbishop of York, d. 779/80) had, before his death, instructed Alcuin to go to Rome and return via Francia, foreseeing that the Frankish kingdom could benefit from his learning. The *Vita* thus presents Alcuin’s journey as the fulfilment of a prophecy.⁵² In the case of the *Life of King Alfred*, as I discussed above, Asser presents himself as the final addition to an eminent group of scholars summoned to Alfred’s court. He recounts the summoning of each of these scholars, including himself, in the same way, simply noting their place of origin, without providing any further information about how they came to be known to Alfred. The focus at this point is on Alfred’s agency in creating a centre

⁵⁰ Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 79, ed. Stevenson, p. 63 (tr. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 93).

⁵¹ *Vita Alcuini*, ch. 9, ed. Veyrard-Cosme, *La Vita Beati Alcuini*, p. 260.

⁵² Donald Bullough notes that this account is simply a rewording of Alcuin’s own words in his letter of 800; see *Alcuin*, p. 30.

of learning in Wessex.⁵³ In both cases, therefore, the way the initial meeting is depicted derives in large part from the internal structure of the texts themselves.

There may, however, be a link of a different sort with Alcuin here. Malcolm Godden has suggested that Asser drew inspiration for his claim to have come ‘de occiduis et ultimis Britanniae finibus’ (‘from the remote, westernmost parts of Wales’) from Alcuin’s own reminiscence of his recruitment by Charlemagne.⁵⁴ In a later letter, written at Tours, Alcuin looks back to Charlemagne’s efforts to collect scholars at his court, and recalls how he himself was recruited ‘de ultimis Brittaniae finibus’ (‘from the farthest parts of Britain’).⁵⁵ This parallel raises the possibility that Asser was using other sources concerning (or indeed composed by) Alcuin, lending strength to the argument that the parallels with the *Vita Alcuini* are not merely coincidental.

It is, however, with Alfred’s request that we see the first striking similarity between Asser’s *Life* and the *Vita Alcuini* itself. Asser writes:

When I had been warmly welcomed by him, and we were engaged in discussion, he asked me earnestly to commit myself to his service and to become a member of his household, and to relinquish for his sake all that I had on the left-hand and western side of the Severn. He promised to pay me greater compensation for it (which indeed he was to do). I replied that I could not enter such an agreement incautiously and without due consideration. For it struck me as unfair to abandon those very holy places in which I had been brought up, trained, tonsured, and eventually ordained in

⁵³ While Asser here diverges from the *Vita Alcuini*, Malcolm Godden has suggested that he was depicting Alfred as akin to Charlemagne, who also summoned scholars to his court (Alcuin, Paul the Deacon, Peter of Pisa, Theodulf of Orleans): Godden, ‘Stories from the Court of King Alfred’, p. 137.

⁵⁴ Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 79, ed. Stevenson, p. 63 (tr. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 93).

⁵⁵ Godden, ‘Stories from the Court of King Alfred’, p. 138. Godden reprints the relevant section of the letter (with translation), but for the entire letter see *Alcuini siue Albini epistolae*, no. 229, ed. E. Dümmler, *Epistolae Karolini aevi (II)*, MGH, Epistolae [hereafter Epp.], IV (Berlin, 1895), p. 373.

favour of some other worldly honour and position, unless I were under constraint and compulsion.⁵⁶

Here, Alfred reassures Asser that he will be rewarded for his services. Similarly, Charlemagne tries to entice Alcuin to stay in Francia with the offer of riches, although this promise occurs later in the narrative than in Asser's *Life*, after Alcuin has already spent some time with the emperor. The *Vita Alcuini* notes:

To whom with soothing words Charles spoke: 'We have, excellent teacher, earthly riches in sufficiency, with which I am delighted to honour you as a father. We pray to be illuminated with your riches, for a long time desired but scarcely found, with your repayment of piety'. To whom Albinus [Alcuin] said: 'My Lord King, I do not intend to refuse your desire since it has been confirmed by the authority of Canons. Gladly still, though having been enriched by not modest inheritance in my own paternal region, I am pleased to stand here as a pauper after having spurned this, so that I might be useful to you; only you can obtain this [permission] from my king and bishop'.⁵⁷

Thus both Alfred and Charlemagne promise a reward in return for service. Moreover, Alcuin's reply points to a further parallel. Alcuin notes that he owns much back in Northumbria, but he would be willing to relinquish this in order to serve Charlemagne,

⁵⁶ 'Cumque ab eo benigne susceptus fuisset, inter cetera sententiarum nostrarum famina, me obnixe rogabat, ut devoverem me suo servitio et familiaris ei essem, et omnia, quae in sinistrali et occidentali Sabrinæ parte habebam, pro eo relinquerem: quae etiam maiori mihi remuneratione reddere pollicebatur. Quod et faceret. Respondi ego "Me talia incaute et temerarie promittere non posse. Iniustum enim mihi videbatur, illa tam sancta loca, in quibus nutritus et doctus ac coronatus fueram, atque ad ultimum ordinatus, pro aliquo terreno honore et potestate derelinquere, nisi coactus et compulsus": Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 79, ed. Stevenson, p. 64 (tr. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 93–4).

⁵⁷ 'Quem Karolus uoce blandientis alloquitur: "Sunt nobis, magister eximie, terrenae diuitiae sufficienter, quibus te ut patrem honorare gaudemus. Tuis nos oramus diu desideratis et uix aliquando inuentis, tua cum pietatis mercede, inlustrari". Cui Albinus: "Domine mi rex, tuae non dispono uoluntati rennuere, auctoritate canonum firmata cum fuerit. Libenter etiam, paterna in regione mea non modica hereditate ditatus, hac sprete, tibi ut prodesse possim, hic pauper stare delector; tuum est tantum hoc a meo rege et episcopo impetrare": *Vita Alcuini*, ch. 9, ed. Veyrard-Cosme, *La Vita Beati Alcuini*, p. 260.

without hope or desire for any reward. The notion that a scholar has significant possessions in his own land that he will have to leave behind on entering the king's service is also visible in Asser's *Life*. This is the implication of Alfred entreating Asser to abandon all that he had in Wales, assuring him that he would be compensated for it.

We see, then, that the same theme appears in both texts, but is treated somewhat differently. In the *Life of King Alfred* the words are put in Alfred's mouth, while in the *Vita Alcuini* the claim of inheritance is Alcuin's, and the promise of reward is Charlemagne's. It is likely that what we see here is a common theme in the service of two different purposes. For the author of the *Vita Alcuini* it is a way of reflecting upon Alcuin's character: he is keenly sought after by Charlemagne, but is also too selfless to care for reward. In Asser's case the situation is somewhat different. While Asser stresses that he would not abandon St David's in favour of any worldly honour or position, he does proceed to list in some detail the gifts that Alfred bestowed upon him, including two monasteries, a valuable silk cloak, incense, 'not to mention the countless daily gifts of worldly riches of every sort which it would be tedious to recount at this point for fear of boring my readers'.⁵⁸ He is perhaps conscious of this contradiction, as he stresses:

But let no one think that I have mentioned these gifts here out of some form of pride or self-esteem or for the sake of acquiring greater prestige: I testify in God's presence that I have not done so for this reason, but rather to reveal to those who do not know the king how lavish in his generosity he is. He then immediately gave me permission

⁵⁸ 'exceptis cotidianis donis innumerabilibus in omni genere terrestris divitiae, quae hoc in loco percensere longum est, ne fastidium legentibus procreent': Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 81, ed. Stevenson, p. 68 (tr. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 97).

to ride out to those two monasteries so well provided with goods of all sorts, and from there to return home.⁵⁹

Asser is caught in something of a dilemma: he wants to avoid implying that his service to Alfred derives from desire for reward, but at the same time he wishes to depict Alfred as a generous patron. Indeed, this chapter, following an account of the submission of the Welsh kings (ch. 80), is primarily concerned with stressing how Alfred's followers were suitably enriched. In this his agenda differs from that of the author of the *Vita Alcuini*; Asser was, after all, writing a biography of Alfred, with himself as a supporting character. The author of the *Vita Alcuini* was under no such constraints, and could thus dismiss the prospect of material wealth much more easily than Asser. Nonetheless, the offer of countless gifts, and the scholar's insistence that this was unimportant, remains a striking correspondence between the texts.

There is a further parallel in the specific gifts granted: both scholars are given a pair of monasteries. In Asser's case, this occurred when he was seeking permission to return to St David's after spending eight months in Alfred's service:

When I repeatedly sought permission from him to return and was unable to obtain it by any means, and had finally decided to demand this permission no matter what, I was summoned to him at daybreak on Christmas Eve, and he presented me with two documents in which there was a lengthy list of everything which was in the two

⁵⁹ 'Sed nullus existimet, pro vana aliqua gloria aut adulatione aut maioris honoris quaerendi gratia, me talia hoc in loco dona commemorasse: quod coram Deo nec ideo fecisse testor, sed ut nescientibus propalarem, quam profusus in largitate ille sit. Tunc confestim dedit mihi licentiam equitandi ad illa duo monasteria omnibus bonis referta, et inde ad propria revertendi': *ibid.*

monasteries named Congresbury and Banwell in English. On that same day he granted those two monasteries to me, with all the things which were in them...⁶⁰

In the *Vita Alcuini*, Charlemagne makes a gift of two monasteries to Alcuin:

But having completed a certain amount of time with him, he gave to him two monasteries, namely Bethlehem, which is called by another name Ferrières, and Saint Lupus around Trecas.⁶¹

The gift itself was most probably a coincidence: granting Asser two monasteries was a way of increasing his interests and responsibilities in Wessex, and would have facilitated some sort of ecclesiastical role for the Welshman in Alfred's kingdom. However, the framing of the episode suggests a potential connection with the *Vita Alcuini*. It occurs in the same location in both texts: Charlemagne offers these monasteries as a gift to Alcuin after the latter has spent some time with him and started to introduce him to the liberal arts, while Asser has already spent eight months with Alfred. Both texts also present a connection between the offer of the monasteries and the scholars' desire to return home: Asser is given the gift as he is seeking permission to return to St David's, and Alcuin also seeks permission to return to Northumbria immediately after being granted the two monasteries.

The final parallel concerns the reservations expressed by the scholars. Both scholars are reluctant to leave their respective ecclesiastical institutions to serve at a foreign court. Both feel that they must first consult with their own people before agreeing to the requests of

⁶⁰ 'Cumque ab eo frequenter licentiam revertendi quaererem et nullo modo impetrare possem, tandem cum et licentiam omnino exposcere statuissem, diluculo vigiliae Natalis Domini advocatus ad eum, tradidit mihi duas epistolas, in quibus erat multiplex supputatio omnium rerum, quae erant in duobus monasteriis, quae Saxonice cognominatur Cungresbyri et Banuwille, et mihi eodem die tradidit illa duo monasteria cum omnibus, quae in eis erant...': Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 81, ed. Stevenson, pp. 67–8 (tr. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 97).

⁶¹ 'Tempore uero aliquanto cum eo peracto dedit illi duo monasteria, Betleem scilicet, quod altero nomine Ferrarias uocatur, et Sancti Lupi apud Trecas': *Vita Alcuini*, ch. 9, ed. Veyrard-Cosme, *La Vita Beati Alcuini*, p. 260.

their respective kings. We have already encountered Asser's explanation of his reluctance as part of his account of the rewards promised to him by Alfred, quoted above:

For it struck me as unfair to abandon those very holy places in which I had been brought up, trained, tonsured, and eventually ordained in favour of some other worldly honour and position, unless I were under constraint and compulsion.⁶²

Alcuin's reservations are in a similar vein:

But thereafter, Alcuin, unwilling to abandon his home without the authority of his king and bishop, where he had been educated and tonsured and consecrated a deacon, asked the great king, that he might give to him permission to go back to his homeland.⁶³

Despite the lack of direct verbal parallels, the loyalties to the religious houses at which Alcuin and Asser had been educated, tonsured and ordained, and their reservations about leaving those sacred sites are described in strikingly similar ways. It is also significant that the *Vita Alcuini* refers here to *proprium ... locum* and *patriam*. While at the corresponding point in his text Asser refers to St David's as *sancta loca*, on other occasions in the autobiographical chapters he uses *ad patriam* or *ad propria* when speaking of returning to St David's.⁶⁴ Thus the same terminology is used by Asser to describe St David's and by the author of the *Vita Alcuini* to refer to York. Reservations about leaving, however, are expressed at different points in the two texts: while Asser voices his reluctance before

⁶² 'Iniustum enim mihi videbatur, illa tam sancta loca, in quibus nutritus et doctus ac coronatus fueram, atque ad ultimum ordinatus, pro aliquo terreno honore et potestate derelinquere, nisi coactus et compulsus': Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 79, ed. Stevenson, p. 64 (tr. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 94).

⁶³ 'At denique Albinus nolens sine auctoritate regis sui et episcopi proprium deserere locum quo educatus quoque capitis comam amiserat ac in leuitam consecratus fuerat, postulauit magnum regem, ut daret ei licentiam remeandi in patriam': *Vita Alcuini*, ch. 9, ed. Veyrard-Cosme, *La Vita Beati Alcuini*, p. 260.

⁶⁴ 'quarto die ab eo equitantes ad patriam remeauimus' ('and on the fourth day I left him and rode off home'): Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 79, ed. Stevenson, p. 65 (tr. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 94); 'et inde ad propria revertendi' ('and from there to return home'): Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 81, ed. Stevenson, p. 68 (tr. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 97).

agreeing to enter Alfred's service, the corresponding passage occurs a little later in the *Vita Alcuini*, after Alcuin has spent some time serving Charlemagne and is being pressed to stay for longer.

The evidence that Asser was familiar with the *Vita Alcuini* rests on a series of parallels: the reservations expressed by the scholars; the way the scholars describe their religious houses; the focus on the gifts the patron is able to give, and the ultimate rejection of these gifts; and the gift of two monasteries. The most striking parallel is the similarity in the framing of the reservations, and the description of York and St David's. For such a small section of Asser's text (the parallel text in the *Vita Alcuini* is even smaller) these add up to a significant number of similarities. Crucially, this section of Asser's *Life* is unique in the context of royal biography: not one of the other texts thought to have influenced Asser inserts the author into the work as a character in this way. The only text to provide a really plausible model is the *Vita Alcuini*.

IV

If connections between the *Life of King Alfred* and the *Vita Alcuini* can be drawn, this adds to what we know about Asser's engagement with continental sources. Asser clearly knew and used Einhard's *Vita Karoli*, but familiarity with the *Vita Alcuini* would suggest a wider knowledge of Carolingian texts, extending well beyond royal biography. Nonetheless, as other scholars have noted, Asser did not thoughtlessly imitate his Carolingian sources: although familiar with the *Vita Karoli*, his was far from a passive imitation of royal biography.⁶⁵ Indeed, examining the changes that Asser made to the sources upon which he drew can be a productive line of enquiry with the potential to reveal much about the author's

⁶⁵ Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 55; Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, pp. 457–61.

own circumstances, and above all the Welsh dimensions to his text and career. This becomes clear if we consider one of the principal differences between Asser's *Life* and the *Vita Alcuini*: the role that St David's plays in Asser's account.

As we have already seen, there is a very clear correspondence in reservations expressed by both Alcuin and Asser about abandoning their home for service with Charlemagne and Alfred; but we also need to note important differences in their relationship to those they were leaving behind. In the *Vita*, Alcuin is preoccupied with the authority (*auctoritas*) of his king and bishop over his actions. We have already encountered the *Vita*'s claim that, when requested by Charlemagne to spend more time in Francia, Alcuin was unwilling to abandon the place where he had been educated and consecrated a deacon 'sine auctoritate regis sui et episcopi' ('without the authority of his king and bishop').⁶⁶ Nor is this the first time that the *Vita* refers to the authority of Alcuin's king and bishop. When Alcuin initially agrees to commit himself to Charlemagne's service it is only after he has obtained permission from the same figures:

But Alcuin, wanting to serve the success of others, did what he [Charlemagne] had asked of him, with the authority of his own king and bishop, with the command that he would return to them again; and thus went, with Christ providing guidance, to King Charles.⁶⁷

On this first occasion the permission is conditional on Alcuin returning at a future date. This condition or command (*ius*) from Alcuin's king and bishop that Alcuin should return remains a concern for the rest of the chapter, and is presumably what prompts Alcuin's later statement (already quoted) that he cannot commit to spending more time in Francia without their

⁶⁶ *Vita Alcuini*, ch. 9, ed. Veyrard-Cosme, *La Vita Beati Alcuini*, p. 260.

⁶⁷ 'Fecit autem Alcuinus, aliorum deservire cupiens profectui, ut sibi rogarat, cum auctoritate regis sui proprii et archiepiscopi, eo tantum iure, ut iterum ad eos reuerteretur; peruenitque, Christo ducatum praebente, ad regem Karolum': *ibid.*

authority. Now that Charlemagne wanted him to stay for longer, Alcuin felt that he had to consult once more. Presumably this is also the concern that lies behind his very final speech to Charlemagne:

Libenter etiam, paterna in regione mea non modica hereditate ditatus, hac sprete, tibi ut prodesse possim, hic pauper stare delector; tuum est tantum hoc a meo rege et episcopo impetrare.

Gladly still, though having been enriched by not modest inheritance in my own paternal region, I am pleased to stand here as a pauper after having spurned this, so that I might be useful to you; only you can obtain this [permission] from my king and bishop.⁶⁸

Here Alcuin rejects Charlemagne's offer of earthly reward and claims that he is nonetheless willing to serve the emperor. However, the last clause ('tuum est tantum hoc a meo rege et episcopo impetrare') is difficult to interpret. Alcuin seems to be saying that it is only Charlemagne who can obtain 'this' (*hoc*) from 'my king and bishop' ('a meo rege et episcopo'). It is logical to assume that *hoc* refers back in a general way to the permission Alcuin was keen to seek at the beginning of this conversation with Charlemagne, when he expressed his discomfort at leaving the place he had been brought up, educated, tonsured and ordained, without the authority of his king and bishop. This preoccupation thus continues throughout the conversation with Charlemagne until the emperor reluctantly allows Alcuin to return to Britain. The author refers twice to the 'authority' (*auctoritas*) of Alcuin's king and bishop, once to the 'condition' or 'command' (*ius*) that they set him, and alludes again to their authority in Alcuin's final speech to Charlemagne.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

While Asser is similarly insistent that he cannot simply agree to serve Alfred immediately, the way in which he expresses this reservation is rather different. Firstly, it is ‘his people, his own’ whom Asser desires to consult, referring to them on four occasions in the chapter:

To which I replied in the following terms: that even this I could not promise casually and rashly without being able to take the advice of my people.⁶⁹

I promised that I would come back to him in six months’ time, health permitting, with an answer which would be acceptable to me and my people, and agreeable to him.⁷⁰

I pledged myself to the king’s service as I had promised, with the understanding and consent of all our people, for the benefit of that holy place and everyone living there...⁷¹

For our people were hoping that, if I should come to Alfred’s notice and obtain his friendship through some such arrangement, they might suffer less damaging afflictions and injuries at the hands of King Hyfaidd.⁷²

Thus the identity of those whom Asser wishes to consult is much more general than in Alcuin’s case; it seems simply to be the community at St David’s as a whole. Of course, that Asser does not refer to obtaining the permission of a king is unsurprising: in the same chapter he refers to King Hyfaidd of Dyfed as trampling upon the rights of St David. Indeed, as seen

⁶⁹ ‘Ad quod ego taliter respondi “Nec hoc suaviter et temerarie sine consilio meorum posse promittere”’: Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 79, ed. Stevenson, p. 64 (tr. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 94).

⁷⁰ ‘Promisi, me iterum ad eum post sex menses, sospite vita, reversurum, cum tali responso, quod mihi et meis utile ac sibi placabile esset’: Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 79, ed. Stevenson, p. 64 (tr. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 94).

⁷¹ ‘Discedente igitur infirmitate, ex consilio et licentia nostrorum omnium, pro utilitate illius sancti loci et omnium in eo habitantium, regi, ut promiseram, eius servitio me devovi...’: Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 79, ed. Stevenson, p. 65 (tr. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 94).

⁷² ‘Sperabant enim nostri, minores tribulationes et iniurias ex parte Hemeid regis sustinere ... si ego ad notitiam et amicitiam illius regis qualicunque pacto pervenirem’: Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 79, ed. Stevenson, pp. 65–6 (tr. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 94).

in the extract above, Asser claims that the community of St David's hoped Alfred would be able to protect it from Hyfaidd. But the more interesting feature is that he does not mention seeking the permission of a bishop before joining Alfred's service. This may be, of course, because Asser was himself already bishop of St David's when he was sought out by Alfred.

There has been much debate over Asser's status prior to his appointment as bishop of Sherborne (892 x 900).⁷³ In the preface to the *Regula pastoralis*, possibly composed as early as 890, Alfred or someone writing in his voice refers to Asser as *minum biscepe* ('my bishop'), implying that he was already of episcopal status.⁷⁴ This could be connected to the gifts recorded in the *Life* as being granted to Asser by Alfred, including, crucially, 'Exanceastre, cum omni parochia, quae ad se pertinebat, in Saxonia et in Cornubia' ('Exeter with all the jurisdiction pertaining to it in Saxon territory and in Cornwall').⁷⁵ This statement causes problems for scholars because Exeter was within the diocese of Sherborne, and thus it would not have been possible for a bishop to be based there. It has consequently been suggested that Asser acted as a *chorepiscopus*, an assistant bishop to the bishop of Sherborne, based at Exeter. Sherborne was a growing diocese, a point reinforced by its subdivision on Asser's death in 909, and so it is possible that the diocese was becoming too extensive for the management of a single bishop.⁷⁶

There is certainly evidence for the existence of *chorepiscopi* in Anglo-Saxon England, although much of this relates to the eleventh century, and in some cases the evidence is

⁷³ Asser's status as bishop of Sherborne is evidenced by episcopal lists and charters. The last charter witnessed by his predecessor is dated to 892, and the first charter witnessed by Asser himself is dated to 900. For further discussion, see Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 49.

⁷⁴ *Regula pastoralis*, ed. Sweet, *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care*, pp. 6–7. For discussion of the dating of this text, see Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 35.

⁷⁵ Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 81, ed. Stevenson, p. 68 (tr. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 97).

⁷⁶ H.P.R. Finberg, 'Sherborne, Glastonbury and the Expansion of Wessex', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., iii (1953), pp. 101–24, at 115–16; S. Pearce, *The Kingdom of Dumnonia: Studies in History and Tradition in South-Western Britain, A.D. 350–1150* (Padstow, 1978), p. 115; Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 49 and 264–5 n. 193; O. Padel, 'Asser's *Parochia* of Exeter', in F. Edmonds and P. Russell, eds., *TOME: Studies in Medieval History and Law in Honour of Thomas Charles-Edwards* (Woodbridge, 2011), pp. 65–72, at 68.

unclear and the status of the bishops contested.⁷⁷ It is nevertheless possible that Asser held this position before his appointment as bishop of Sherborne. Oliver Padel has argued that such an arrangement would have been most likely if Asser was already a bishop prior to his appointment to Exeter.⁷⁸ The ambiguity of the evidence concerning the *chorepiscopi* makes it difficult to judge whether or not this would have been the case. There are certainly examples of *chorepiscopi* who were already bishops, the most relevant in this context being Tryferyn (d. 1055), a bishop of St David's who also acted as an assistant bishop at Hereford. However, this arrangement was prompted by specific circumstances: Tryferyn was brought in to aid Bishop Æthelstan of Hereford, who was blind.⁷⁹ But this is simply one example: not all *chorepiscopi* were bishops prior to their appointments. Ealdred, abbot of Tavistock, appears to have acted as a *chorepiscopus*, assisting Lyfing, bishop of Worcester, Devon and Cornwall, before his own appointment as bishop of Worcester on Lyfing's death in 1046.⁸⁰ The circumstances surrounding the appointment of *chorepiscopi*, and the status of these individuals prior to their appointment, thus appears to have varied. As a result, while the suggestion that Asser acted as a *chorepiscopus* prior to his appointment as bishop of Sherborne does not preclude the possibility that he was already bishop of St David's when he was approached by Alfred, it does little to strengthen the argument.

There is, however, other evidence to suggest that Asser may indeed have been bishop of St David's. While the claim made in the *Life* that he had been brought up, tonsured and

⁷⁷ For a list of instances see F. Barlow, *The English Church, 1000–1066: A History of the Later Anglo-Saxon Church* (London, 1963), pp. 246–7 n. 8; M.F. Giandrea, *Episcopal Culture in Late Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2007), pp. 121–2. An ambiguous example is the case of the bishops based at St Germans in the tenth century, who may have been *chorepiscopi* of the diocese of Crediton. H.P.R. Finberg argued in favour of this; see 'Sherborne, Glastonbury and the Expansion of Wessex', pp. 118–19. Cf. L. Olson, *Early Monasteries in Cornwall* (Woodbridge, 1989), pp. 74–5.

⁷⁸ Padel, 'Asser's *Parochia*', esp. pp. 68–9.

⁷⁹ Giandrea, *Episcopal Culture in Late Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 122; J.R. Davies, 'The Archbishopric of St Davids and the Bishops of *Clas Cyndir*', in J.W. Evans and J.M. Wooding, eds., *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation* (Woodbridge, 2007), pp. 296–304, at 300–301.

⁸⁰ Giandrea, *Episcopal Culture in Late Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 121–2; F. Barlow, 'Lyfing [Living] (d. 1046)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

ordained at St David's implies that he was simply a monk and priest, Gerald of Wales refers to Asser as a bishop of St David's in his *Itinerarium Cambriae*, composed in 1191.⁸¹ Moreover, the Welsh annals refer to Asser as a bishop or archbishop on his death.⁸² The evidence in the *Life* itself is ambiguous. The following passage has been identified as possible evidence that Asser was a bishop of St David's:

For our people were hoping that, if I should come to Alfred's notice and obtain his friendship through some such arrangement, they would suffer less damaging afflictions and injuries at the hands of King Hyfaidd (who often assaulted that monastery and the jurisdiction of St David, sometimes by expelling those bishops who were in charge of it, as happened to my kinsman Archbishop Nobis; he even expelled me on occasion during this period).⁸³

Here Asser seems to pair himself with Nobis as someone who was in charge of St David's and had been expelled by Hyfaidd at some point.⁸⁴

That Asser phrases his desire for consultation in a different way from the author of the *Vita Alcuini* may perhaps point to him being a bishop at the time. Further evidence to support this contention comes if we compare the specific phrasing used by Asser to express his reservations with that used in the *Vita Alcuini*. While Asser constantly refers to 'his people' and Alcuin to his 'bishop and king', there is a further difference in the way they express the nature of their discussion with these respective parties. Alcuin continuously refers to the *auctoritas* ('authority') of his king and bishop, and to their *ius* ('command' or 'condition'),

⁸¹ Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 52.

⁸² Davies, 'The Archbishopric of St Davids', p. 299.

⁸³ 'Sperabant enim nostri, minores tribulationes et iniurias ex parte Hemeid regis sustinere, – qui saepe depraedabatur illud monasterium et parochiam Sancti Degui, aliquando expulsionem illorum antistitem, qui in eo praeesent, sicut et Nobis archiepiscopum, propinquum meum, et me expulit aliquando sub ipsis, – si ego ad notitiam et amicitiam illius regis qualicunque pacto pervenirem': Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 79, ed. Stevenson, pp. 65–6 (tr. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 95–6).

⁸⁴ Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 52.

but crucially Asser is not so specific. When Alfred suggests that he split his time equally between Wessex and St David's, Asser insists: "Nec hoc suaviter et temerarie sine consilio meorum posse promittere" ("that even this I could not promise casually and rashly without being able to take the advice of my people").⁸⁵ He further promises that he will return with an answer which would be pleasing to him and his people, again suggesting a degree of discussion.⁸⁶ He does refer to *licentia* ('permission') in the final instance, but pairs this with *consilium* ('advice'), noting that he returned to Alfred 'ex consilio et licentia nostrorum omnium' ('with the understanding and consent of all our people').⁸⁷ Clearly, therefore, there is not such a rigid focus on obtaining permission in Asser's *Life* as in the *Vita Alcuini*. This may be another indication of Asser's episcopal status.

If Asser did use the *Vita Alcuini* as a model for this section of his *Life of King Alfred*, then it emphasises the care he took to explain why he left St David's. The parallels with the *Vita Alcuini* explored here all contribute to the case Asser makes for his decision to serve Alfred. He highlights his own reluctance, his desire for consultation, and the generosity of his new lord. As suggested by David Kirby, this carefully crafted case makes the most sense if it is directed towards the community he was leaving.⁸⁸ This is especially the case if he was its bishop. 'If Asser were actually bishop of St David's, the difficulty of his position would be the more easy to understand', as Keynes and Lapidge have observed.⁸⁹ It would be difficult for a bishop to justify leaving his diocese to serve Alfred, and it would explain Asser's insistence that he divide his time between Wessex and St David's. It would also explain the length to which Asser goes to justify his decision. Whilst Asser may have wished to compare himself to Alcuin (and indeed Alfred to Charlemagne by implication), this need not have

⁸⁵ Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 79, ed. Stevenson, p. 64 (tr. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 94).

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ch. 79, ed. Stevenson, p. 65 (tr. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 94).

⁸⁸ Kirby, 'Asser and his Life of King Alfred', pp. 20–21. See n. 14 above.

⁸⁹ Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 261 n. 174.

been the only reason for turning to the *Vita Alcuini* for inspiration. If Asser sought to make a convincing case to his people at St David's, then the *Vita Alcuini* would have provided him with an effective way of doing so.

V

As the *Vita Alcuini* only survives in two medieval manuscripts from France, with no other evidence that it was ever known in Britain, the possibility that Asser was familiar with the work has the potential to transform our knowledge of the transmission and reception of that particular text. This also has implications for our understanding of the *Vita*'s availability on the continent. Of particular relevance here is scholarly speculation that Thegan may have been familiar with the anonymous biography of Alcuin.⁹⁰ Whilst the *Gesta Hludowici imperatoris* is clearly indebted to the *Vita Karoli*, Thegan nonetheless departs from Einhard's classical model, presenting Louis as a Christian ruler. Thegan claims that Louis would no longer read or listen to 'poetica carmina gentilia' ('pagan poetic songs') which he had learned in his youth.⁹¹ Ernst Tremp drew a comparison between Thegan's presentation of Louis as turning away from 'poetica carmina gentilia' and the claim made by the *Vita Alcuini* (ch. 16) that Alcuin had loved old poetry in his youth, but saw the error of his ways and abandoned

⁹⁰ Thegan, *Die Taten Kaiser Ludwigs; Astronomus. Das Leben Kaiser Ludwigs*, ed. Tremp, p. 201 n. 101; M. Innes, "He Never Even Allowed his White Teeth to be Bared in Laughter": The Politics of Humour in the Carolingian Renaissance', in G. Halsall, ed., *Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 131–56, at 145–6; Noble, *Charlemagne and Louis the Pious*, p. 188.

⁹¹ Thegan, *Gesta Hludowici imperatoris*, c. 19, ed. Tremp, p. 200. Mayke de Jong argues that Thegan presents Louis as undertaking a *conversio*, turning his back on such secular traditions in favour of increasing his understanding of scripture; see 'The Empire as *ecclesia*: Hrabanus Marus and Biblical *historia* for Rulers', in Y. Hen and M. Innes, eds., *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 191–226, at 197 n. 15.

this pastime as he grew older.⁹² Tremp also noted a further parallel in one of Alcuin's letters, where he states that it is unbecoming to listen to 'carmina gentilium' ('the songs of pagans').⁹³ Alcuin and Thegan, therefore, appear to share an opinion on the secular pastime of listening to pagan songs. A full assessment of whether Thegan utilised the *Vita Alcuini* in his depiction of Louis the Pious is beyond the scope of this article. However, it is an intriguing possibility, especially as scholars have pointed to general parallels between Asser's *Life of King Alfred* and Thegan's *Gesta Hludowici imperatoris*.⁹⁴ At the start of this article I noted that the *Vita Alcuini* is not a well-known text. But perhaps its popularity in the medieval period is now in need of reassessment.

If the *Vita Alcuini* did travel to Britain, how might Asser have encountered it? While, as noted by Thomas Charles-Edwards, we need to be cautious before assuming that all of Asser's learning was acquired at Alfred's court, it seems likely that he would have come across the *Vita Alcuini* in this context.⁹⁵ Keynes and Lapidge have raised the tantalising possibility that the *Vita Alcuini* was brought to Alfred's court by Grimbold of St Bertin.⁹⁶ We know that one of the two extant medieval manuscripts containing the *Vita Alcuini* originated in Rheims, suggesting a connection with Archbishop Hincmar, who had moved to that see in 845.⁹⁷ We also know that Grimbold had links with Rheims. Philip Grierson's argument that Grimbold was serving Archbishop Fulk at Rheims when his presence was requested by Alfred no longer holds sway.⁹⁸ However, Fulk's letter to Alfred concerning Grimbold's

⁹² Thegan, *Gesta Hludowici imperatoris*, ed. Tremp, p. 201 n. 101; *Vita Alcuini*, c. 16, ed. Veyrard-Cosme, *La Vita Beati Alcuini*, pp. 284–6. See also Innes, '“He Never Even Allowed his White Teeth to be Bared in Laughter”, pp. 145–6; Noble, *Charlemagne and Louis the Pious*, p. 188.

⁹³ Thegan, *Gesta Hludowici imperatoris*, ed. Tremp, p. 201 n. 101; *Alcuini siue Albini epistolae*, no. 124, ed. Dummler, *Epistolae Karolini aevi (II)*, p. 183. For further discussion of this letter, see B. Yorke, 'Ingeld, Weland and Christ', *Quaestio Insularis: Selected Proceedings of the Cambridge Colloquium in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic*, xiv (2013), pp. 1–14.

⁹⁴ See discussion above.

⁹⁵ Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, pp. 453–4.

⁹⁶ Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 55.

⁹⁷ Bullough, *Alcuin*, p. 21; Veyrard-Cosme, *La Vita Beati Alcuini*, pp. 36–9.

⁹⁸ P. Grierson, 'Grimbold of St Bertin's', *English Historical Review*, lv (1940), pp. 529–61, at 551. Janet Bately argued that Grierson's conclusion was based on a misunderstanding of Fulk's letter to Alfred; see 'Grimbold of

appointment to the king's court does suggest a close relationship between the monk and the archbishop of Rheims.⁹⁹ Such a connection may have brought Grimbald into contact with the *Vita Alcuini*. Whatever the means by which the text reached Britain, if Asser did encounter the *Vita Alcuini* at the court in Wessex, then this would reveal much about the scholarly community assembled by Alfred. Familiarity with the *Vita Alcuini* would suggest that these scholars were not simply reading continental texts about kings (such as the *Vita Karoli*, for example), but that they were also interested in their own predecessors, the scholars of those kings. An interest in Alcuin, whose own career spanned both sides of the Channel, would suggest a degree of self-consciousness of their own existence as an international scholarly community.

These broader implications aside, this examination has a significant impact on our understanding of Asser and his *Life of King Alfred*. By assessing whether Asser was familiar with the *Vita Alcuini*, this investigation has illuminated some of the ways in which he constructed his biography of Alfred. The autobiographical section of the *Life* is carefully balanced, stressing the kindness and generosity of Alfred as a lord, while simultaneously justifying Asser's own decision to leave St David's. Thus Asser explains how Alfred promised to compensate him for his services, and how he was showered in all manner of gifts by the king, including two monasteries. This account of the king's generosity is related across chapters 79 and 81, on either side of the chapter describing the submission of the Welsh kings to Alfred (ch. 80). Asser wanted his audience to be left in no doubt of the rewards that could result from a close relationship with the Anglo-Saxon king. This is in line with the impression given throughout the work: Alfred was a king worth serving.

St Bertin's', *Medium Ævum*, xxxv (1966), pp. 1–10, at 10 n. 61. See also Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 332 n. 7.

⁹⁹ For the letter, see *Cartularium Saxonicum: A Collection of Charters Relating to Anglo-Saxon History*, ed. Walter de Gray Birch (3 vols., London, 1885–93), ii. 190–94, no. 555 (tr. Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 182–6).

However, Asser balances this praise of Alfred with a careful presentation of his own actions. His reluctance to leave the monastic community of which he was a part is at the forefront of the narrative: the promise is made to answer Alfred's request only after consulting his own people, and the eventual agreement allows him to divide his time equally between St David's and Wessex. Asser succeeds in presenting himself as a sought-after scholar, the final addition to an eminent international group of scholars already gathered at the court, whilst also stressing his dedication to his own people. It is in creating this image of himself as a reluctant scholar that Asser may have turned to the *Vita Alcuini* for inspiration, modelling his own journey to enter Alfred's service on Alcuin's journey to enter Charlemagne's. Asser wanted to cast himself in a very specific light, and it seems likely that he drew on the *Vita Alcuini* to aid him in this task. The meticulous construction of this autobiographical section also strengthens the case that, while Asser may have had many audiences in mind, including Alfred's court, he also intended his work to reach Wales. But his was a very particular Welsh audience: the community located at St David's, whom Asser wished to convince of the benefits of his own service to Alfred, while reassuring them of his continued dedication to their well-being.

This exploration of a connection between the *Life of King Alfred* and the *Vita Alcuini* thus illuminates the purposes of Asser's work and one of its intended audiences. However, it also reveals much about Asser himself. In comparing himself to Alcuin, and his relationship with Alfred to that of Alcuin with Charlemagne, Asser stresses the importance of his role as a scholar to the Anglo-Saxon king. However, it is possible that Asser identified with the presentation given in the *Vita Alcuini* of the Northumbrian scholar who travelled to Francia. Asser was a foreigner at Alfred's court, and the *Vita Alcuini* would have provided him with a way of explaining his own life as much as that of his king.

